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**Ideological patterns of coalition making in Serbian parliamentary elections:
Evidence based on experts' opinions**

Abstract

The paper is focusing on the patterns of coalition making in Serbian parliamentary elections, through the examination of motives for formation of pre-electoral alliances since the democratic changes in the year 2000. In the period of democratic consolidation, Serbian party system is still burdened with the long lasting practice of excessive coalition making: for example, in 2014 election, 12 out of 19 lists were coalitions; and in 2016 election, 9 out of 20.

The question about the nature of this practice is twofold: are these coalitions formed because of ideological similarities; or is the motivation for association more pragmatically founded in political calculation to overcome the electoral threshold or gain additional parliamentary seats, and thereby released of ideological constraints? In order to determine the logic behind excessive coalition making, the impact of ideological factor will be investigated. This objective requires the use of classification of political parties, based on the experts' opinions survey carried out by the author in 2014, and further complemented in 2017. In the survey, 18 relevant experts from the field of political science evaluated Serbian political parties' ideologies on a single dimensional axis (extreme left to extreme right). The classification will serve as a basis for examination of ideological congruence of coalitions and further conclusions on the nature of coalition making.

Furthermore, based on the same evidence, the author will make a time-section analysis of ideological stability of Serbian party system since 2000, in order to identify the patterns of ideological landscape through the years, mapping the significant changes in relation to the external factors of impact: such as EU accession, quality of democracy, cycles of economic

crises and the issue of Kosovo - all the question that presumably could have the prevailing impact on the political and party dynamics in Serbia.

Keywords: Serbia; elections; political parties; ideology; coalition making; expert survey

Coalition Making in Political Theory

Pre-electoral coalitions are particularly important for understanding not just the electoral process, but also the dynamics of a political system. Coalition making processes may have a significant impact on voter behavior and outcome of the elections, and furthermore, on the composition and course of both future government and opposition alike. It can also hold important implications on the party identities, dynamics of party system, and future political landscape of the country.

Pre-electoral coalition is defined as a group of political parties that competes in the election together (Golder 2006, 12). There are several criteria for identifying a coalition: the presence of two or more collective political actors in the agreement, public statement of the agreement, mutual coordination and interdependence of those actors in decision making and campaign management (Golder 2006, 12-14). More specifically, in proportional (PR list) electoral systems, pre-electoral coalition is defined as an agreement of multiple actors to appear on a single national electoral list (Bandyopadhyay, Chatterjee, and Sjostrom 2011, 3). This rather simple definition does not impose any additional criteria other than the presence of candidates from two or more parties on a joint list, which is highly applicable to the example of Serbia, where coalition making is seldom formal and transparent. Namely, the presence of candidates from different parties on a single list without any formal agreement has become a common practice in Serbian elections. Some authors have defined coalitions as forms of association of political actors who have joined together in order to maximize potential benefits, and, more specifically, to increase their chances of success in the election (Orlović 2010, 99). Such utilitarian definition excludes other possible motives for association, apart from purely instrumental one - the improvement of the parties' electoral result.

What are the underlying reasons for pre-electoral coalition making? Several theories are based on the analysis of potential incentives or situational determinants, such as party leaderships and their mutual relations, party membership and voter expectations, general internal and international context etc. (Strom and Muller 1999, 25). On the other hand, institutional explanations are mainly focused on the impact of electoral system on party behavior. According to these theories (Golder 2006, 23-25) the PR list system, along with electoral threshold, which is the system in effect in Serbia, urges parties to group together. Election rules and seat distribution mechanisms in PR list system provide incentives for coalition making, with parties aiming to prevent the waste of votes. In such cases, smaller parties usually group around bigger, dominant players. Although these theories tend to clarify the incentives for coalition making, they do not provide an explanation for certain patterns that emerge in the process.

Ideological congruence is one of the two most widely adopted explanations of coalition formation logic. Political parties tend to join pre-electoral alliances with ideologically similar partners (see: Gschwend and Hooghe 2008), and the likelihood of coalition increases as ideological distance decreases (Martin and Stevenson 2001, 41). This explanation stands in accordance with the “policy-seeking” model, stating that parties are primarily interested in joining coalitions with programmatically and ideologically similar partners, that would increase the probability of preferred policies being implemented, and party manifestos fulfilled (see: De Swann 1973). On the other hand, certain authors assume that politicians are pragmatic, and their main objective is getting the office: in that quest, politicians will often make irrelevant policy promises, given solely for instrumental reasons (Laver and Shepsle 1996, 18-19). Hence, the “office-seeking” model presumes that parties will form coalitions irrespective of ideological positions and preferences (Grzymala-Busse 1999, 4). This theory will provide an alternative hypothesis in the research. Namely, if two primary motivations for coalition making are ideology and pragmatism, it should be assumed that one explanation excludes other, and that, by confirming the ideological patterns in Serbian coalitions, the explanation based on “office-seeking” pragmatism can be dismissed.

Excessive Coalition Making in Serbia

It seems that the hypothesis on the frequency of pre-electoral coalitions in proportional systems can be easily confirmed in Serbia. Prolonged post-authoritarian and post-conflict

transition have caused a chaotic and fragmented party system, marked by low level of institutionalization, weak party identifications and relatively high volatility between electoral cycles, along with flawed internal party democracy (see: Bursac and Vucicevic 2016). Although the party system cleavages in post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe tend to be more complex than those in established democracies (see: Markus 1996; Komšić, Pantić, and Slavujević 2003), giving the fact that they have formed during transitional period, in which a number of political, institutional, economic, social and, in some cases, national issues had to be solved simultaneously – even those divides are identified along established ideological categories, most often in the left-right spectrum (Stojiljković 2011, 112-114).

However, in some cases, the party behavior seems to depart from the ideological lines, which is apparently the case when examining the coalition making practices of Serbian political parties. Apart from coalition governments, which are almost an inevitable outcome in proportional electoral systems, especially those with high fragmentation, political parties in Serbia tend to form large number of pre-electoral alliances. The logic of this association, aside from presumed strategic political pragmatism, remains unexamined, despite the possible negative outcomes that can spur out of the practice. Namely, excessive coalition making results in an increased number of parliamentary parties, which in turn produces a seemingly needless number of veto players burdening the decision-making processes, both in parliament and subsequently in government (see: Tsebelis 1995). For example, current Serbian parliament elected in 2016 is comprised of 250 MP's from 35 different political parties, elected from 12 different lists. Apart from a large number of potential veto players in decision making process (current ruling coalition is formed by 18 parties), this practice also hinders the party identities, voter identification and moreover, the estimation of real influence and support of a number of bandwagoning players, who seldom compete alone in the elections.

The issue of excessive coalition making is becoming evident when examining the nominated lists from several previous electoral cycles. Since the reintroduction of multiparty pluralism in 1990, Serbia had undergone through an extremely high number of 11 parliamentary electoral cycles. After the fall of Milosevic regime in October 2000, Serbian citizens went to the polling booths to elect members of parliament seven times: in 2000, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2016. Before the year 2000, the logic of coalition making was clear: opposition parties

joined forces in attempts to overthrow the authoritarian government, and this policy meta-objective meant that there was little or no regard for other ideological or programmatic principles. For instance, the coalition that toppled Milosevic (named Democratic Opposition of Serbia) in October 2000 presidential and subsequent December 2000 parliamentary elections consisted of 19 political parties, stretching from ideological left to right, including both national, regional, and ethnic minority parties, along with number of civic organizations, NGO's and trade unions. However, the utilitarian logic of that arrangement was found in the common cause that transcended ideology as a basis for association. Nonetheless, the coalition making trend continued thereafter, peaking in the latest 2014 and 2016 elections (see: Table 1).

Table 1. Coalitions in Serbian parliamentary elections (2003-2016)

Elections	Total lists on the ballot	Coalitions on the ballot	Lists in the parliament	Coalitions in the parliament
2003	19	8	6	4
2007	20	12	11	7
2008	22	8	8	7
2012	18	7	11	7
2014	19	12	7	4
2016	20	9	12	6

Several explanations are required. In the 2007 election, for the first time, the threshold for ethnic minority lists was abolished (reduced from 5% to a natural threshold, which stands at roughly 0.4% of votes needed to gain one parliamentary seat), resulting in five minority parties entering the parliament. Their success prompted other minority candidates to compete independently in 2008, increasing the number of minority lists on the ballot to 10. However, only three minority lists managed to gain enough votes and enter the parliament – all three of them being coalitions. Moreover, the 2014 election brought a certain reduction in number of parliamentary parties, with just four coalitions overcoming the threshold, along with three minority parties. Similar trend is observable in 2016: apart from five minority lists in the parliament, five out of remaining seven parliamentary lists entered the competition as pre-

electoral coalitions (all data on coalitions and electoral results are retrieved from: Republička izborna komisija 2017; Narodna skupština Republike Srbije 2017).

Over the observed period, number of parties participating in these alliances showed no signs of significant decrease, with 54 and 46 parties forming different coalitions in two recent electoral cycles (see: Table 2). Since 2003, number of coalitions nominated on the ballot never fell below seven, and average number of parties per coalition during the whole six-cycle period was 4.43. This is another interesting finding. Beside the large number of coalitions, Serbian parties tend to form oversized alliances. Biggest coalitions in 2014 and 2016 election comprised of 10 and 11 member parties, respectively.

Table 2. Number of parties in pre-electoral coalitions (2003-2016)

Elections	Number of coalitions	Number of parties in coalitions	Average number of parties per coalition
2003	8	41	5.13
2007	12	46	3.83
2008	8	28	3.5
2012	7	33	4.71
2014	12	54	4.5
2016	9	46	5.11

The above presented data indicate that excessive coalition making is not just a passing trend, but a permanent phenomenon inherent to the Serbian political system. Although the explanation for the phenomenon could be found in institutional arrangements of proportional electoral system, the logic of association between parties is not sufficiently examined. The question arises: do these coalitions derive from ideological similarities between the parties involved, or is the reason more superficial and based solely on strategic office-seeking calculation to maximize the votes and the parliamentary seats. And, even if the motive is primarily utilitarian, what is the role of party ideology in the process – can any ideological pattern in coalition making be identified?

Measuring the Coalitions' Ideologies: Expert Survey

General idea of examination of potential ideological patterns presumes initial classification of parties on left-right spectrum, followed by comparison of associated parties in order to gain insights about the levels of ideological congruence in coalitions.

For that purpose, the broad definition of coalition will be employed: any alliance which implies the appearance of candidates from two or more different parties on a single list will be included in analysis, regardless of the list's name or the existence of formal coalition agreement. Furthermore, coalitions made exclusively from ethnic minority parties will be excluded from the sample, for two distinctive reasons. Firstly, their ideology is primarily particular and usually confined to the protection of specific cultural interests of certain minority group and as such stands outside of examined ideological spectrum. For the same reason, several minor coalitions representing local or regional political groups, without any firm ideological groundings (which so far appeared in 2007, 2012, and 2014 election), will also be omitted. Secondly, due to the demographic and institutional factors, logic of association of minority parties representing small ethnic groups can be found in the common cause of overcoming the natural threshold.

Expert survey, a questionnaire of selected experts in the field (see: Castles and Mair 1984) is chosen as a preferable method of ideological classification of political parties. Other methods, such as identification of ideologies based on self-imposed attributes like party name or membership in supranational party federation would not provide consistent and comprehensive results when comes to Serbian parties. Moreover, the analysis of political programs and electoral manifestos is not an option, primarily because of their inconstancy and widespread eclecticism Serbian parties often display in these documents.

Experts (political scientists, university professors, researchers, political analysts and journalists) have been asked to classify Serbian political parties on a single dimensional ideological axis, ranging from extreme left (value 0 on the scale) to extreme right (value 5), for five parliamentary elections between 2007 and 2016. The 2003 election is purposely omitted from the survey, not just because the patterns of association from Milosevic-era were still in effect, but also because the 5% threshold was then applicable to all parties, which prompted virtually all ethnic minorities to seek alliances with bigger parties, thus heavily inflicting any possible ideological pattern of coalition formation. The final results of survey proved to be very consistent, with negligible amount of outlier values, enabling the calculation of ideological score

(IS) for every party, as a mean value of individual expert opinions (for complete dataset with ideological score and left-right spectrum categorization of 81 political party, along with list of coalitions and their members in 2007, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2016 elections, see online: Bursac 2017).

Ideological Cross Section of Coalitions

Based on surveyed results, each party is assigned to one of five categories on left-right spectrum, depending on the calculated value of its ideological score (IS): far left (IS value: 0 to 1); moderate left (IS: 1 to 2); center (IS: 2 to 3); moderate right (IS: 3 to 4); and far right (IS: 4 to 5). Out of the 81 parties analyzed, 36 fall into the category of far right, tilting the ideological playground significantly to the right (see: Table 3) – with average ideological score of the whole 2007-2016 sample standing at IS=2.91.

Table 3. Ideological outline of the 2007-2016 sample

Ideological category	Number of parties
Far left	7
Moderate left	21
Center	9
Moderate right	16
Far right	28

However, high number of far right parties can be deceiving. A number of these groups never gained any parliamentary representation, with most of them appearing only at one electoral cycle, before dispersing. Only 12 parties from the far right category have managed to gain seats in the parliament at least once in the last five cycles, with just one party having the ideological score higher than IS=4.35: traditionally nationalist Serbian Radical Party (IS=4.94). Other far right parties managed to enter parliament either as part of the conservative coalition gathered around Democratic Party of Serbia (IS=3.94), or as a part of currently ruling populist coalition led by Serbian Progressive Party (IS=4.07). On the other hand, field is balanced by the relatively high number of moderate left and moderate right parties (21 and 16, respectively), with most of them spurring from the grand coalition that toppled Milosevic in 2000.

Further analysis is considering which coalitions are ideologically congruent. Every coalition containing two or more parties aligning across ideological lines (i.e. left parties colluding with right parties and vice versa; and also: center parties colluding with far right or far left parties, and vice versa) is not following the ideological pattern and is hence assessed as non-congruent. This is an operationalization of Axelrod's theory, which assumes that, considering policy dimension criterion, coalitions are formed by parties adjacent to each other in the left-right ideological space (see: Axelrod 1970).

Out of the 31 alliances examined, 12 are following the ideological pattern, with member parties belonging to the same ideological category, while 19 coalitions contain parties with mixed ideological background. Several observations can be drawn from these results. Right wing parties mostly tend to join the ideologically uniform coalitions: 9 out of 12 congruent coalitions are coming from either moderate right or far right category. Dominant parties, such as Serbian Progressive Party (IS=4.07) or Democratic Party (IS=1.83) incline towards oversized coalitions with a number of smaller partners, which subsequently decreases their common regard to ideology. Serbian Progressive Party was joined by other 10, nine, and 10 parties respectively in the last three electoral cycles since their foundation, while the Democratic Party was traditionally teamed by 4 or 5 parties in each of the last five cycles. Likewise, the left wing Socialist Party of Serbia (IS=0.65) participated in non-congruent coalitions in every election observed, mostly due to their habit of colluding with one or two smaller far right parties, in order to gain the nationalist vote. Similar can be said for the centrist Liberal Democratic Party (IS=2.69), which often runs on the same ticket with conservative and left wing partners simultaneously. Coalitions gathered around these four parties (Serbian Progressive Party, Democratic Party, Socialist Party of Serbia, and Liberal Democratic Party) are responsible for the staggering 18 out of 19 ideologically non-congruent alliances over the last five cycles. On the other hand, these four coalitions also received majority of votes between them (see: Table 4), indicating that main Serbian parties and voters alike hold low regard towards ideological puritanism. Moreover, it is important to note that Serbian Progressive Party participated in the election for the first time in 2012, with their improving result (absolute majority of seats in both 2014 and 2016 elections) and affinity towards oversized coalitions is contributing to these findings significantly.

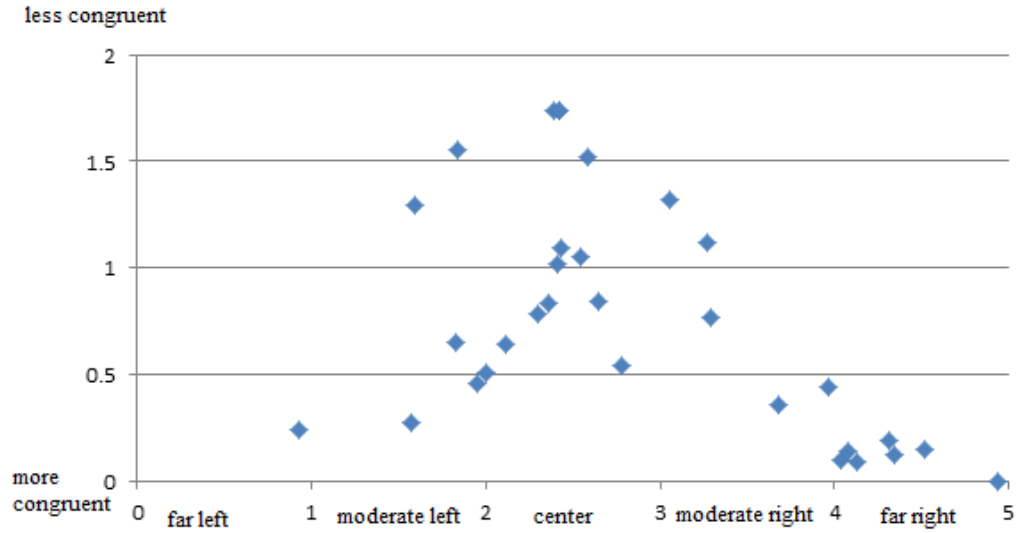
Table 4. Percentage of votes received by the four non-congruent coalitions (2007-2016)

Elections	Combined vote %
2007	33.66%
2008	51.24%
2012	67.14%
2014	71.23%
2016	70.24%

In order to further examine the level of ideological congruence, the nominal ideological value of coalitions is calculated (as a mean value of member parties' ideological score). This consequently enabled the calculation of departure of every member party from their respective coalitions' ideology (the values of departure from the ideological congruence (DIC) for every coalition member 2007-2016 can also be accessed in online dataset: Bursac 2017).

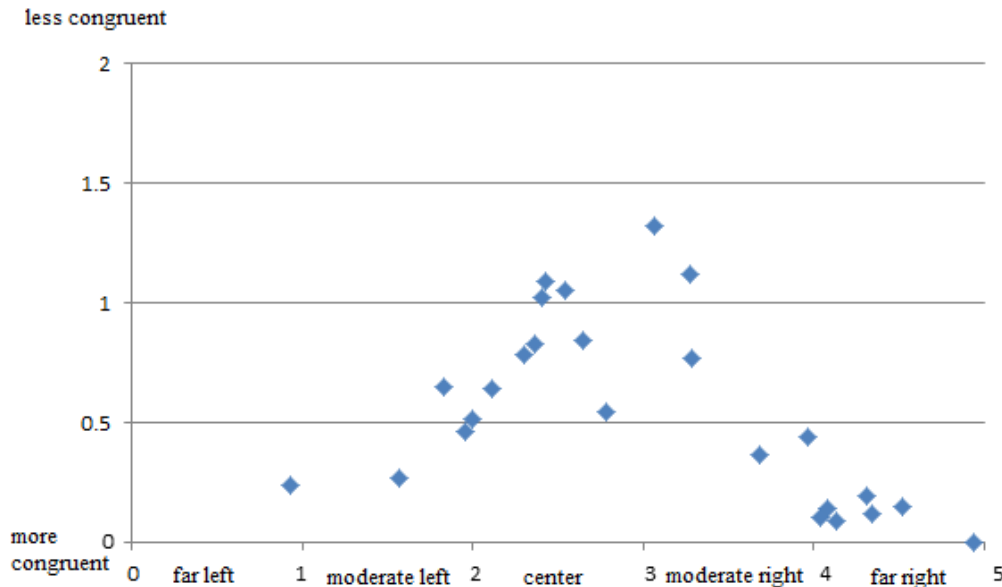
The results align with previous findings. As presumed, the least level of departure is found in right wing coalitions. Total average departure of the seven far right coalitions in 2007-2016 elections stands at just DIC=0.11, signifying that these parties are generally more exclusive towards aligning with their counterparts of other ideological backgrounds. The correlation is showing moderately strong statistical significance ($R=0.64$), confirming that there is a tendency for far right coalitions to be more congruent than others (see: Figure 1). In contrast, total correlation between level of congruence and ideology in all coalitions is relatively weak ($R=0.49$), with ideological orientation of coalitions explaining only a portion of their levels of congruence ($R^2=0.24$).

Figure 1. Level of ideological congruence of 31 coalitions (2007-2016) relative to their ideology



Data also indicates that center coalitions have high propensity towards ideological non-congruence, with the existence of moderate correlation ($R=0.55$) between the ideological score of center coalitions and their average departure. However, this can be deceiving. Ideological score is only nominal, meaning for instance that the alliance between one far left and one far right party is also consider a center coalition. That was especially the case with coalitions gathered around the far left Socialist Party of Serbia, which almost always broke through ideological lines to collude with the far right. Revised sample, with such cases omitted, shows that the least congruent coalitions are those in center and especially moderate right part of the spectrum (see: Figure 2). They are mostly grouped around Democratic Party, Liberal Democratic Party, and particularly, Serbian Progressive Party (average DIC=1.12 in 2014; average DIC=1.32 in 2016 – highest values for coalitions in the corrected sample). Presumably, the biggest disruptor in the moderate right Serbian Progressive Party coalition is a small far left Movement of Socialists ($IS=0$), which is the party with highest individual departure from its coalition’s ideology in the whole sample (DIC=3.29 in 2012; DIC=3.27 in 2014; DIC=3.06 in 2016).

Figure 2. Level of ideological congruence of coalitions (2007-2016) relative to the their ideology, with corrections regarding center coalitions



Having in mind that these parties also gather most members in their coalitions, the correlation between the size and congruence was examined, but surprisingly, result was statistically insignificant ($R=0.10$), meaning that party size does not influence the ideological uniformity sufficiently and, moreover, that there is no difference between smaller and larger coalitions when comes to propensity towards ideological diversity. Even after omitting the coalitions with different patterns of association established (the far right alliances, and diverse left-right coalitions gathered around Socialist Party of Serbia), the correlation between coalition size and ideological congruence remains relatively weak ($R=0.48$), with only a small part of variance explained ($R^2=0.23$).

Finally, the ideological congruence did not show any significance in correlation with different electoral cycles ($R=0.17$), indicating that, even with the passage of time between five electoral cycles, parties are not becoming more aware to ideology when forming coalitions.

Influence of External Factors on Coalition Making

Along with ideological explanations, the possible impact of several external or contextual factors can clarify patterns of both coalition making and major ideological shifts in party cleavages and party dynamics in Serbia. That analysis requires examination of not just pre-

electoral alliances, but also ruling coalitions after elections. From 2007 to 2008, short-lived government was formed by the pre-electoral coalitions gathered around two dominant parties: Democratic Party of Serbia (IS=3.84) and Democratic Party (IS=1.83). Coalition slightly leaned to moderate right, but dissolved soon after Kosovo unilaterally proclaimed independence in early 2008. Despite widespread expectation of right wing victory in 2008 election, following the Kosovo breakaway, Democratic Party won relative majority and led its pro-European centrist coalition in government with far-left Socialist Party of Serbia (IS=0.65). During the full term of office of their coalition, events connected with Kosovo independence, economic crisis, and European integration of Serbia took turns, culminating with Serbia receiving full candidate status with the EU in March 2012, just two months before the election – a perceived boost for the government. However, many unmet public expectations brought a new change, with coalition anchored by the newly formed Serbian Progressive Party (IS=4.07) forming the government with Socialist Party of Serbia, who shifted their alliance from center-left Democrats to right Progressives. The newly-formed ruling coalition continued following two snap elections in 2014 and 2016, which practically served to strengthen the Progressives' hold to power and, apart from few minor parties switching alliances from Democratic Party to a new government, did not bring any significant ideological change regarding the ruling left-right coalition.

Inclination towards using the elections and other institutions for party purposes has further amplified accusations of authoritarian tendencies of Progressives-Socialists coalition (Stojanovic and Bertoa 2017). Therefore, factors regarding the quality of democracy are included in the model (Economist Intelligence Unit 2017; Freedom House 2017). Furthermore, the following data is quantified and examined in a time series, in correlation with the ideological score of parties in government from 2007 to 2017: regarding Kosovo, unilateral declaration of independence (2008), International Court of Justice advisory opinion on Kosovo independence (2010), and Brussels agreement on normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo (2013); regarding EU accession: signing of Stabilization and Association Agreement (2008), abolition of visa requirements for Serbian citizens travelling to Schengen countries (2009), gaining of full candidate status for Serbia (2012), and opening of negotiations on accession (2014); annual unemployment rates and annual growth rates for the examined period (World Bank 2017); and data regarding economic freedoms (The Heritage Foundation 2017).

Most of the examined variables did not show any significant correlation with ruling coalitions' ideologies or major ideology shifts. EU integration and Kosovo related events, unemployment, Index of Economic Freedom, Democracy Index, and Freedom Index all resulted with very weak correlation ($R < 0.20$ in all individual cases); while only annual growth rate displayed some significance ($R = 0.36$), but insufficient to draw any specific conclusion. This is certainly an indication of a very complex issue. The party motivation for coalition making and especially post-electoral ruling coalition shifts is not depending directly on suggested factors, although the combination of events related to prolonged EU accession, Kosovo independence and economic crisis all seemed as plausible causes. However, none of these factors can be singled out as decisive: even if they had an effect on party behavior regarding the changes in party alliances and ruling coalitions, and, moreover, on voter preferences, they did not display any statistically significant relation with ideology. As if the ideological orientation of political parties is only a nominal category, largely unrelated to party decisions regarding major political events.

Conclusions

Research revealed only partial links between party ideology and coalition making, with just a modest correlation between coalitions' ideologies and congruence. Out of 31 pre-electoral coalitions examined, 12 were found to be ideologically congruent. Coalitions gathered around four dominant parties (Serbian Progressive Party, Democratic Party, Socialist Party of Serbia, and Liberal Democratic Party) proved to be ideologically inconsistent in every single of the last five cycles, regardless of parties' position on left-right spectrum. Smaller parties cluster around these four to gain parliamentary seats, which presumably would not be possible for them individually, but motivation of dominant parties in these arrangements is less clear. For them, association with smaller parties of modest organizational capabilities and suspicious voter support, who, above all, represent different ideologies, could presumably be explained only as a product of calculated interest: as a way to display power and synergy to potential voters, and, consequently, as a mean to improve the overall electoral results. This claim is supported by the research results: since the ideological congruence could not be statistically verified as the explanation for coalition making, the alternative hypothesis is adopted. Namely, the logic and motivation of parties that form coalitions unburdened with ideological preferences can be

considered pragmatic and thus aligned with “office-seeking” theories. That certainly seems to be the case with coalition forming in Serbian party system.

There are nevertheless some exceptions. Rightist coalitions tend to be ideologically more homogenous than center and left, with moderately strong correlation between levels of congruence and right wing orientation. In general, whole ideological field in Serbia is tilted to the right, with high number of far right parties and coalitions entering the race every cycle. However, they seldom gain representation, with the party system further balanced by the abundance of moderate left and moderate right parties, which enjoy relatively steady support.

There is also a strong propensity to create oversized coalitions. Above mentioned dominant parties often form broad alliances that sometimes include more than 10 members. However, examination of correlation between number of parties and coalitions’ congruence demonstrated in effect that size does not matter. Both small and large coalitions have similar disregard towards the ideological uniformity.

These trends have been observed in a similar effect in every of the five electoral cycles examined. The impact of ideology on coalition making is not improving over time, regardless of the causes such as economy, Kosovo or EU integration, which could potentially incentivize dominant parties to seek more ideologically similar partners. It seems that the primary explanation of coalition making can be found in interest-based strategic choices of political actors competing for office in proportional electoral system with five percent threshold, rather than in ideological similarities and preferences. Although some ideological patterns are displaying, their extent is not sufficient enough to be considered as a general rule.

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